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SAMUEL JOHNSON

THE LESLIE STEPHEN LECTURE

DELIVERED IN THE SENATE HOUSE

CAMBRIDGE 22 FEBRUARY 1907

BY

WALTER RALEIGH

KING'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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SAMUEL JOHNSON

THE honour that the University of Cambridge has done me by asking me to deliver the first Leslie Stephen lecture is the best kind of honour, for it appeals even more to affection than to pride. Like most men whose trade is lecturing, I have known many Universities ; but none of them can be so dear to memory as the first, the place of my early friendships, and dreams, and idleness.

A quarter of a century ago I heard Leslie Stephen lecture in the Divinity Schools of this place. I saw him once again, on the uplands of Cornwall, but I never again heard his voice. You will not expect from me, therefore, any reminiscences, or intimate appreciation of his character. But I can say something of what I believe was very imperfectly known to him, the regard and reverence that was felt for him by a younger generation. A busy man of letters, always occupied with fresh tasks, has little time to study the opinions of his juniors. He makes his progress from book to book, without looking back, and knows more of the pains of doing than of the pleasures of the thing done. Far on in his career, while he is still struggling with his difficult material, he discovers, to his surprise, that the younger world regards him as a triumphant dictator and law-giver. Something of this kind I think happened to Leslie Stephen. He woke up, late in life, to find himself an established institution. He was pleased, and half-incredulous, and he turned to his weary task again. But indeed he had been famous and influential far

longer than he knew. The work in literary criticism that was done by him, and by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, was unlike most of the criticism of the last age. Amid a crowd of treatises which directed attention chiefly to the manner of an author, it was a solid comfort to come across a critic who made it his business to grasp the matter, and who paid even a poet the compliment of supposing that he had something to say. There is no finer literary model than bare matter of fact; and Leslie Stephen's style, 'the lean, terse style' as it has been called, constantly aimed at this perfection. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, under his control, became a gymnasium for authors, a gymnasium where no one was permitted to exercise his muscle until he had stripped himself of those garments which ordinary literary society expects authors to wear. It was Leslie Stephen's aim to prove that this avoidance of superfluity is not the negation of criticism. He was nothing if not critical, but he endeavoured to identify his criticism with the facts, to make it the wall of the building, not a flying buttress. When he relaxed something of his rigour and severity, as he did in his latest studies, his ease was like Dryden's, the ease of an athlete; and the native qualities of his mind, his sincerity and kindliness and depth of feeling, are nowhere more visible than in his latest and best prose. He still keeps close to his subject, but he permits himself an indulgence which he had formerly refused, and sometimes, for a few delightful sentences, speaks of himself.

There is no need for haste in estimating his work and his services to good letters. These will not soon be forgotten. I like to think that he would have approved my choice of a subject for the first of the lectures associated with his name. His enjoyment of books, he

said at the close of his life, had begun and ended with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Literature, as it is understood for the purposes of these lectures, is to include, so I am informed, biography, criticism, and ethics. If I had been commanded to choose from the world's annals a name which, better than any other, should serve to illustrate the vital relations of those three subjects to literature, I could find no better name than Samuel Johnson. He was himself biographer, critic, and moralist. His life is inseparable from his works; his morality was the motive power of all that he wrote, and the inspiration of much that he did. Of all great men, dead or alive, he is the best known to us; yet perhaps he was greater than we know.

The accident which gave Boswell to Johnson and Johnson to Boswell is one of the most extraordinary pieces of good fortune in literary history. Boswell was a man of genius; the idle paradox which presents him in the likeness of a lucky dunce was never tenable by serious criticism, and has long since been rejected by all who bring thought to bear on the problems of literature. If I had to find a paradox in Boswell I should find it in this, that he was a Scot. His character was destitute of all the vices, and all the virtues, which are popularly, and in the main rightly, attributed to the Scottish people. The young Scot is commonly shy, reserved, and self-conscious; independent in temper, sensitive to affront, slow to make friends, and wary in society. Boswell was the opposite of all these things. He made himself at home in all societies, and charmed others into a like ease and confidence. Under the spell of his effervescent good-humour the melancholy Highlanders were willing to tell stories of the supernatural. 'Mr. Boswell's frankness and gayety,' says Johnson, 'made

everybody communicative.' It was no small part of Boswell's secret that he talked with engaging freedom, and often, as it seemed, with childish vanity, of himself. He had the art of interesting others without incurring their respect. He had no ulterior motives. He desired no power, only information, so that his companions recognized his harmlessness, and despised him, and talked to him without a shadow of restraint. He felt a sincere and unbounded admiration for greatness or originality of intellect. 'I have the happiness,' he wrote to Lord Chatham, 'of being capable to contemplate with supreme delight those distinguished spirits by which God is sometimes pleased to honour humanity.' But indeed he did not confine his interest to the great. He was an amateur of human life; his zest in its smallest incidents and his endless curiosity were infectious and irresistible. No scientific investigator has ever been prompted by a livelier zeal for knowledge; and his veracity was scrupulous and absolute. 'A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist,' said Johnson, 'who does not love Scotland better than truth.' Boswell was very far indeed from being a sturdy moralist, but he loved truth better than Scotland, better even than himself. Most of the stories told against him, and almost all the witticisms reported at his expense, were first narrated by himself. He had simplicity, candour, fervour, a warmly affectionate nature, a quick intelligence, and a passion for telling all that he knew. These are qualities which make for good literature. They enabled Boswell to portray Johnson with an intimacy and truth that has no parallel in any language.

We owe such an enormous debt of gratitude to Boswell that it seems ungrateful to suggest what is nevertheless obviously true, that the Johnson we know

best is Boswell's Johnson. The *Life* would be a lesser work than it is if it had not the unity that was imposed upon it by the mind of its writer. The portrait is so broad and masterly, so nobly conceived and so faithful in detail, that the world has been content to look at Johnson from this point of view and no other. Yet it cannot be denied, and Boswell himself would have been the first to admit it, that there are aspects and periods of Johnson's career which are not and could not be fully treated in the *Life*. When Johnson first saw Boswell in Tom Davies's back shop, he was fifty-four years old and Boswell was twenty-two. The year before the meeting Johnson had been rescued, by the grant of an honourable pension, from the prolonged struggle with poverty which makes up so great a part of the story of his life. He had conquered his world; his circumstances were now comparatively easy and his primacy was universally acknowledged. All these facts have left their mark on Boswell's book. We have some trivial and slight memorials of Shakespeare by men who treated him on equal terms of friendship or rivalry. But Johnson, in our conception of him, is always on a pedestal. He is Dr. Johnson; although he was sixty-six years of age when his own University gave him its honorary degree. The fact is that we cannot escape from Boswell, any more than his hero could; and we do not wish to escape, and we do not try. There are many admirers and friends of Johnson who are familiar with every notable utterance recorded by Boswell, who yet would be hard put to it if they were asked to quote a single sentence from *The Rambler*. That splendid repository of wisdom and truth has ceased to attract readers: it has failed and been forgotten in the unequal contest with Boswell. 'It is not sufficiently considered,'

said Johnson, in an early number of *The Rambler*, 'that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.' I desire to remind you of the work of Johnson, the writer of prose; and I am happy in my subject, for the unique popularity of Boswell has given to the study of Johnson's own works a certain flavour of novelty and research.

It will be wise to face at once the charge so often brought against these writings, that they are dull. M. Taine, who somehow got hold of the mistaken idea that Johnson's periodical essays are the favourite reading of the English people, has lent his support to this charge. Wishing to know what ideas had made Johnson popular, he turned over the pages of his *Dictionary*, his eight volumes of essays, his biographies, his numberless articles, his conversation so carefully collected, and he yawned. 'His truths,' says this critic, 'are too true, we already know his precepts by heart. We learn from him that life is short, and we ought to improve the few moments granted us; that a mother ought not to bring up her son as a fop; that a man ought to repent of his faults and yet avoid superstition; that in everything we ought to be active and not hurried. We thank him for these sage counsels, but we mutter to ourselves that we would have done very well without them.' I will not continue the quotation. It is clear that M. Taine's study of Johnson was limited to a table of contents. What he says amounts to this—that Johnson's writings are a treasury of commonplaces; and in this opinion he certainly has the concurrence of a good many of Johnson's fellow countrymen, who have either refused to read the works or have failed after a gallant attempt.

A commonplace, I take it, is an oft-repeated truth

which means nothing to the hearer of it. But for the most perfect kind of commonplace we must enlarge this definition by adding that it means nothing also to the speaker of it. Now it cannot be denied that Johnson's essays are full of commonplace in the first and narrower sense. When he came before the public as a periodical writer, he presented the world with the odd spectacle of a journalist who cared passionately for truth and nothing at all for novelty. The circulation of *The Rambler* was about five hundred copies, and the only number of it which had a great sale was a paper by Richardson, teaching unmarried ladies the advantages of a domestic reputation and a devout bearing at church as effective lures for husbands. Johnson's papers often handle well-worn moral themes in general and dogmatic language, without any effort to commend them to the reader by particular experiences. He did not conceal from himself the difficulty of making any impression on the wider public—'a multitude fluctuating in pleasures or immersed in business, without time for intellectual amusements.' In many passages of his works he shows a keen appreciation of the obstacles to be surmounted before an author can capture the attention and wield the sympathies of his readers. The chief of these obstacles is the deep and sincere interest which every author feels in his own work and which he imagines will be communicated automatically to the reader. 'We are seldom tiresome to ourselves.' Every book that can be called a book has had one interested and excited reader. It is surely a strange testimony to the imperfection of human sympathy and the isolation of the single mind that some books have had only one.

An author's favourite method of attack in the attempt to cross the barrier that separates him from his reader

is the method of surprise. The writer who can startle his public by an immediate appeal to the livelier passions and sentiments is sure of a hearing, and can thereafter gain attention even for the commonplace. This method was never practised by Johnson. He despised it, for he knew that what he had to say was no commonplace, so far as he himself was concerned. Among all his discourses on human life he utters hardly a single precept which had not been brought home to him by living experience. The pages of *The Rambler*, if we can read them, are aglow with the earnestness of dear-bought conviction, and rich in conclusions gathered not from books but from life and suffering. It is here that the biography of the writer helps us. If he will not come to meet us, we can go to meet him. Any reader who acquaints himself intimately with the records of Johnson's life, and then reads *The Rambler*, must be very insensible if he does not find it one of the most moving of books. It was so to Boswell, who says that he could never read the following sentence without feeling his frame thrill : 'I think there is some reason for questioning whether the body and mind are not so proportioned that the one can bear all which can be inflicted on the other ; whether virtue cannot stand its ground as long as life, and whether a soul well principled will not be separated sooner than subdued.'

Almost every number of *The Rambler* contains reflections and thoughts which cease to be commonplace when the experiences that suggested them are remembered. For more than thirty years of his mature life Johnson was poor, often miserably poor. There are three degrees of poverty, he said—want of riches, want of competence, and want of necessaries. He had known them all. He spoke little of this in his later years ;

there is no pleasure, he said, in narrating the annals of beggary. But his knowledge of poverty has expressed itself more than once in the quiet commonplaces of *The Rambler*. Again, he was tortured by what he called indolence, but what was more probably natural fatigue consequent upon the excessive nervous expenditure of his bouts of hard work. And this too finds expression in *The Rambler*. 'Indolence,' he says, 'is one of the vices from which those whom it infects are seldom reformed. Every other species of luxury operates upon some appetite that is quickly satiated, and requires some concurrence of art or accident which every place will not supply; but the desire of ease acts equally at all hours, and the longer it is indulged is the more increased. To do nothing is in every man's power; we can never want an opportunity of omitting duties.' The topics of *The Rambler* are many, but the great majority of them are drawn from the graver aspects of life, and it is when he treats of fundamental duties and inevitable sorrows, bereavement, and disease, and death, that Johnson rises to his full stature. When he ventures to emulate the tea-table morality of the *Spectator* he has not a light or happy touch. Yet his knowledge of the human mind is not only much more profound than Addison's, it is also more curious and subtle. In an essay on bashfulness he first investigates its causes, and finds the chief of them in too high an opinion of our own importance. Then he applies the remedy:

'The most useful medicines are often unpleasing to the taste. Those who are oppressed by their own reputation will, perhaps, not be comforted by hearing that their cares are unnecessary. But the truth is that no man is much regarded by the rest of the world. He that considers how little he dwells upon the condition

of others, will learn how little the attention of others is attracted by himself. While we see multitudes passing before us, of whom, perhaps, not one appears to deserve our notice, or excite our sympathy, we should remember that we likewise are lost in the same throng; that the eye which happens to glance upon us is turned in a moment on him that follows us, and that the utmost which we can reasonably hope or fear is, to fill a vacant hour with prattle, and be forgotten.'

This is prose that will not suffer much by comparison with the best in the language. It is strange to remember, as we read some of the noblest of Johnson's sentences, that they were written in a periodical paper for the entertainment of chance readers. His essay on Revenge concludes with an appeal not often to be found in the pages of a society journal: 'Of him that hopes to be forgiven, it is indispensably required that he forgive. It is therefore superfluous to urge any other motive. On this great duty eternity is suspended; and to him that refuses to practise it, the throne of mercy is inaccessible, and the Saviour of the world has been born in vain.'

The passages that I have quoted from *The Rambler* are perhaps enough to illustrate what Johnson means when he speaks, in the last number, of his services to the English language. 'Something, perhaps, I have added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence.' Later criticism has been inclined to say rather that he subdued the syntax of his native tongue to a dull mechanism, and taught it a drowsy tune. But this is unjust. It is true that he loved balance and order, and that the elaborate rhetorical structure of his sentences is very ill-adapted to describe the trivial matters to which he sometimes applies it, such

as the arrival of a lady at a country house. 'When a tiresome and vexatious journey of four days had brought me to the house, where invitation, regularly sent for seven years together, had at last induced me to pass the summer, I was surprised, after the civilities of my first reception, to find, instead of the leisure and tranquillity which a rural life always promises, and, if well conducted, might always afford, a confused wildness of care, and a tumultuous hurry of diligence, by which every face was clouded and every motion agitated.' In a sentence like this, the ear, which has been trained to love completeness and symmetry, shows itself exorbitant in its demands, and compels even the accidents of domestic life to happen in contrasted pairs. The idle antithetical members of the sentence have been compared to those false knobs and handles which are used, for the sake of symmetry, in a debased style of furniture. But this occasional fault of the formal Johnsonian syntax is of a piece with its merits. The sentence is very complex, and when no member of it is idle, when every antithesis makes room for some new consideration, it can be packed full of meaning, so that it exhibits a subject in all its bearings, and in a few lines does the work of a chapter. When Johnson is verbose and languid, it is often because his subject is slight, and does not yield him matter enough to fill his capacious style. The syntax is still a stately organ, fitted to discourse great music, but the bellows are poor and weak. When his mind gets to work on a subject that calls forth all his powers, his vigour and versatility, displayed within a narrow compass, are amazing. There is nothing new to add to his brief conclusion in the question of the second sight, which he investigated with some care during his Highland journey. 'To collect sufficient testimonies,' he says, 'for the

satisfaction of the public, or of ourselves, would have required more time than we could bestow. There is, against it, the seeming analogy of things confusedly seen and little understood; and, for it, the indistinct cry of national persuasion, which may be perhaps resolved at last into prejudice and tradition. I never could advance my curiosity to conviction; but came away at last only willing to believe.'

In *The Lives of the Poets* his style reaches its maturity of vigour and ease. The author of these *Lives* is Boswell's Johnson, the brilliant talker, the king of literary society,

Who ruled, as he thought fit,
The universal monarchy of wit.

Yet for the light that they throw on Johnson's own character I doubt whether any of the *Lives* can compare with *The Life of Richard Savage*, which was published almost twenty years before the meeting with Boswell. The character of Savage was marked, as Boswell truly observes, by profligacy, insolence, and ingratitude. But Johnson had wandered the streets with him for whole nights together, when they could not pay for a lodging, and had taken delight in his rich and curious stores of information concerning high and low society. The *Life of Savage* is a tribute of extraordinary delicacy and beauty, paid by Johnson to his friend. Only a man of the broadest and sanest sympathies could have performed this task, which Johnson does not seem to find difficult. Towards Savage he is all tenderness and generosity, yet he does not for an instant relax his allegiance to the virtues which formed no part of his friend's character. He tells the whole truth; yet his affection for Savage remains what he felt it to be, the most important truth of all. His morality is so

entirely free from pedantry, his sense of the difficulty of virtue and the tragic force of circumstance is so keen, and his love of singularity of character is so great, that even while he points the moral of a wasted life he never comes near to the vanity of condemnation. It is abundantly clear from the facts, which he records with all the impartiality of a naturalist, that Savage, besides being hopelessly self-indulgent and dissolute, was violently egotistic, overbearing, and treacherous to his friends. Johnson's verdict on these faults is given in the closing sentences of the *Life*: 'The insolence and resentment of which he is accused were not easily to be avoided by a great mind, irritated by perpetual hardships, and constrained hourly to return the spurns of contempt and repress the insolence of prosperity; and vanity surely may be readily pardoned in him, to whom life afforded no other comforts than barren praises and the consciousness of deserving them. Those are no proper judges of his conduct, who have slumbered away their time on the down of plenty; nor will any wise man easily presume to say, "Had I been in Savage's condition, I should have lived or written better than Savage."'

If we try to picture Johnson in his most characteristic attitude we usually see him sitting on that throne of human felicity, a chair in a tavern, and roaring down opposition. It was thus that Boswell knew him best, and though the same record exhibits him in many other aspects, yet the predominant impression persists. So Johnson has come to be regarded as a kind of Chairman to humanity, whose business it is to cry 'Order, Order,' an embodiment of corporate tradition and the settled wisdom of the ages.

Yet we may think of him, if we like, in a less public

fashion, as a man full of impulse and whim, quaint in humour, passionate in feeling, warm in imagination, and, above all, original. You can never predict what Johnson will say when his opinion is challenged. Doubtless he loved paradox and argument, but he was no dialectician, and behind the play of talk his fancies and tastes were intensely individual. He disliked all talk that dealt with historical facts, especially the facts of Roman history. He never, while he lived, desired to hear of the Punic War. Others besides Johnson have been distressed and fatigued by talk that is merely an exercise of memory. But his method of escape was all his own. When Mrs. Thrale asked his opinion of the conversational powers of Charles James Fox, 'He talked to me at club one day,' said Johnson, 'concerning Catiline's conspiracy—so I withdrew my attention, and thought about Tom Thumb.'

Johnson is famous for his good sense and sound judgement, but his good sense abounds in surprises. There is a delightful touch of surprise in his comparison of a ship to a jail. 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail ; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.' And again, 'A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.' The same dislike of the sea expresses itself in a paper of *The Rambler* which discusses the possibility of varying the monotony of pastoral poetry by introducing marine subjects. But unfortunately the sea has less variety than the land. 'To all the inland inhabitants of every region, the sea is only known as an immense diffusion of waters, over which men pass from one country to another, and in which life is frequently lost.'

Wherever you open the pages of Johnson's works

you will find general truths sincerely and vigorously expressed, but behind the brave array of dogma you will find everywhere the strongest marks of an individual mind, and the charm and colour of personal predilections. The Romantic writers must not be allowed the credit of inventing the personal note in literature. What they invented was not themselves, but a certain sentimental way of regarding themselves. Johnson despised all such sentiment. 'When a butcher tells you,' he said, 'that his heart bleeds for his country, he has in fact no uneasy feeling.' Rousseau is not more individual in his cultivation of sentiment than Johnson in his dislike of it. He carried this dislike to strange extremes, so that all gesticulation and expression of the emotions became suspect to him. Of the preaching of Dr. Isaac Watts he says, 'He did not endeavour to assist his eloquence by any gesticulations; for, as no corporeal actions have any correspondence with theological truth, he did not see how they could enforce it.' Perhaps the best example of this fixed distaste for demonstrative emotion may be found in his contempt for the actor's profession. It is dangerous to quarrel with Boswell, but it seems to me impossible to accept his suggestion that Johnson's opinions concerning stage-players had their origin in jealousy of the success of Garrick. Such jealousy is utterly unlike all that we know of Johnson. On the other hand, a hatred of show and a fierce resentment at the response of his own feelings to cunningly simulated passion are exactly what we should expect in him. The passages in which he has expressed himself on this matter are too many and too various to be attributed to a gust of personal ill-feeling. One of the most delightful of them occurs in his notes on the character of Bottom in *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream. 'Bottom,' he says, 'seems to have been bred in a tiring-room. He is for engrossing every part, and would exclude his inferiors from all possibility of distinction.' Again, 'Bottom discovers a true genius for the stage by his solicitude for propriety of dress, and his deliberation which beard to choose among many beards, all unnatural.'

The sonorous and ponderous rotundity of Johnson's style, and the unfailing respect that he pays to law and decorum, have partly concealed from view the wilfulness of his native temper. Obedience to law can never be the soul of a man or of a writer. It is the converted rebels who give power to the arm of government. If there has ever been a writer of a sober, slow, and conforming temper, who has left memorable work behind him, it will be found, I think, that for the greater part of his life he acted as a poor mechanical drudge in the service of his own youthful enthusiasm, and painfully filled out the schemes which were conceived in a happier time. All enduring literary work is the offspring of intense excitement. Johnson did most of his reading piecemeal, in a fever of agitation. If any man praised a book in his presence, he was sure to ask, 'Did you read it through?' If the answer was in the affirmative, he did not seem willing to believe it. He very seldom read a book from beginning to end; his writing, moreover, was done at high speed, and often at a great heat of imagination. Some writers use general statements as a mask to conceal ignorance and emptiness; Johnson prefers them because they lend smoothness and decency to passion. He states only his conclusions; but the premises, although they are not given, are vividly present to his mind. When it becomes necessary, as a guarantee of sincerity and knowledge, to exhibit in

full all that is implied in a general statement, he reverses his favourite method, and permits his imagination to expatiate on his material with all the visionary activity of poetry. His review of Soame Jenyns's *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* furnishes a splendid instance of this imaginative power, which expands an abstract proposition into all its detailed consequences. Soame Jenyns was a gentleman with a taste for metaphysic, who had offered some conjectures, in the glib optimistic vein of Pope, towards the explanation of failure and suffering. In the course of his essay he touches, with a light hand, on the possible compensations and advantages of pain and poverty. In order to demonstrate that all partial evil is universal good he constructs an airy hierarchy, or graduated scale of imaginary beings, each rank of whom he supposes to derive benefit from the pains of those who inhabit another grade. Johnson's piety and humility, his profound sense of the reality of human suffering and the weakness of human faculty, were outraged by this fantastic philosophy. 'To these speculations,' he says, 'humanity is unequal.' In a passage of relentless satire Soame Jenyns is introduced, for the first time, to the meaning of his own hypothesis. 'He imagines,' says Johnson, 'that as we have not only animals for food, but choose some for our own diversion, the same privilege may be allowed to some beings above us, *who may deceive, torment, or destroy us for the ends only of their own pleasure and utility*. This he again finds impossible to be conceived, *but that impossibility lessens not the probability of the conjecture, which by analogy is so strongly confirmed*.

'I cannot resist the temptation of contemplating this analogy, which, I think, he might have carried further,

very much to the advantage of his argument. He might have shown that *these hunters, whose game is man*, have many sports analogous to our own. As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves now and then with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cock-pit. As we shoot a bird flying, they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apoplexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human philosopher in the effects of an air-pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolic beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why. As they are wiser and more powerful than we, they have more exquisite diversions, for we have no way of procuring any sport so brisk and so lasting as the paroxysms of the gout and the stone, which undoubtedly must make high mirth, especially if the play be a little diversified with the blunders and puzzles of the blind and deaf. We know not how far their sphere of observation may extend. Perhaps now and then a merry being may place himself in such a situation as to enjoy at once all the varieties of an epidemical disease, or amuse his leisure with the tossings and contortions of every possible pain exhibited together.

‘One sport the merry malice of these beings has found means of enjoying to which we have nothing equal or similar. They now and then catch a mortal proud of his parts, and flattered either by the submission of those who court his kindness or the notice of those who suffer him to court theirs. A head thus prepared for

the reception of false opinions and the projection of vain designs they easily fill with idle notions, till in time they make their plaything an author: their first diversion commonly begins with an ode or an epistle, then rises perhaps to a political irony, and is at last brought to its height by a treatise of philosophy. Then begins the poor animal to entangle himself in sophisms and flounder in absurdity, to talk confidently of the scale of being, and to give solutions which himself confesses impossible to be understood. Sometimes, however, it happens that their pleasure is without much mischief. The author feels no pain, but while they are wondering at the extravagance of his opinion, and pointing him out to one another as a new example of human folly, he is enjoying his own applause and that of his companions, and perhaps is elevated with the hope of standing at the head of a new sect.

‘Many of the books which now crowd the world may be justly suspected to be written for the sake of some invisible order of beings—for surely they are of no use to any of the corporeal inhabitants of the world. . . . The only reason why we should contemplate Evil is, that we may bear it better; and I am afraid nothing is much more placidly endured for the sake of making others sport.’

Johnson, it may be remarked, does not answer Soame Jenyns’s argument; he concentrates on it the vivifying heat of his imagination, and it shrivels under the glow. He felt no respect for a structure of theory, however ingenious and elaborate, which is built up from facts imperfectly realized. ‘Life,’ he says, ‘must be seen before it can be known.’ Because he had seen much of life, his last and greatest work, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, is more than a collection

of facts: it is a book of wisdom and experience, a treatise on the conduct of life, a commentary on human destiny.

Those *Lives* will never lose their authoritative value as a record. The biographer must often consult them for their facts. The student of Johnson will consult them quite as often for the light that they throw on their author, who moves among the English poets easily and freely, enjoying the society of his peers, praising them without timidity, judging them without superstition, yet ready at all times with those human allowances which are more likely to be kept in mind by a man's intimates than by an indifferent posterity. When Johnson undertook the *Lives* he was almost seventy years of age; he had long been familiar with his subject, and he wrote from a full mind, rapidly and confidently. He spent little time on research. When Boswell tried to introduce him to Lord Marchmont, who had a store of anecdotes concerning Pope, he at first refused the trouble of hearing them. 'I suppose, Sir,' said Mrs. Thrale, with something of the severity of a governess, 'Mr. Boswell thought, that as you are to write *Pope's Life*, you would wish to know about him.' Johnson accepted the reproof, though he might very well have replied that he knew more than was necessary for his purpose. An even better instance of his indifference may be found in his criticism of Congreve. Congreve's dramatic works are not bulky, and were doubtless to be found in any well-appointed drawing-room. But Johnson would not rise from his desk. 'Of Congreve's plays,' he says, 'I cannot speak distinctly; for since I inspected them many years have passed; but what remains upon my memory is, that his characters are commonly fictitious and artificial,

with very little of nature and not much of life.' Then follows an admirable critical summary of Congreve's peculiar merits in comedy.

This magnanimous carelessness with regard to detail helped rather than hindered the breadth and justice of Johnson's scheme. There are many modern biographies and histories, full of carefully authenticated fact, which afflict the reader with a weight of indigestion. The author has no right to his facts, no ownership in them. They have flitted through his mind on a calm five minutes' passage from the notebook to the immortality of the printed page. But no man can hope to make much impression on a reader with facts which he has not thought it worth his own while to remember. Every considerable book, in literature or science, is an engine whereby mind operates on mind. It is an ignorant worship of Science which treats it as residing in books, and reduces the mind to a mechanism of transfer. The measure of an author's power would be best found in the book which he should sit down to write the day after his library was burnt to the ground.

The *Lives of the Poets* has not a few of the qualities of such a book. It is broadly conceived and written, it has a firm grasp of essentials, the portraits are lifelike, and the judgements, on the whole, wonderfully fair. There has been much extravagant talk among Romantic critics of Johnson's prejudices, and even of his incapacity as a judge of poetry. Time will avenge him on these critics ; and Time has begun to do its work. The minor poets of our own day may well be glad that Johnson is not alive among them.

His occasional errors cannot be concealed ; they are known to every schoolboy. Sometimes he allows his own matured and carefully considered views on certain

general literary questions to interfere with the impartial examination of a particular poem. He disliked irregular metres and fortuitous schemes of rhyme. He held the pastoral convention in poetry to be artificial, frigid, and over-worn. These opinions and tastes led him into his notorious verdict on *Lycidas*. And yet, when the noise of the shouting shall have died away, it may be questioned whether most of the points attacked by Johnson would ever be chosen by admirers of the poem for special commendation. Is there nothing artificial and far-fetched about the satyrs and the fauns with cloven heel? Is the ceremonial procession of Triton, Camus, and St. Peter an example of Milton's imagination at its best? In short, does the beauty and wonder of the poem derive from the allegorical scheme to which Johnson objected? But I am almost frightened at my own temerity, and must be content to leave the question unanswered.

There were certain of the English poets whom Johnson, it is plain, disliked, even while he admired their work. His account of them is inevitably tinged by this dislike; yet his native generosity and justice never shine out more brightly than in the praises that he gives them. He disliked Milton; and no one has ever written a more whole-hearted eulogy of *Paradise Lost*. Unless I am deceived, he disliked many things in the character of Addison, yet any one who would praise Addison nobly and truly will find himself compelled to echo Johnson's praises. A more profound difference of feeling separated him from Swift. He excuses himself from writing a full account of Swift's life, on the ground that the task had already been performed by Dr. Hawkesworth. But Hawkesworth's *Life* is a mere piece of book-making, and it seems likely that Johnson was glad to be saved from a duty that had no attractions for him. The con-

trast between himself and Swift may be best expressed in their own words: 'I heartily hate and detest that animal called man,' said Swift, 'although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.' Johnson's attitude was the reverse of this. He used to say that the world was well constructed, but that the particular people disgraced the elegance and beauty of the general fabric. Yet it was he, not the hearty lover of 'John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth', who had the deeper sense of the tie that binds man to man. That men should dare to hate each other in a world where they suffer the like trials and await the same doom was hardly conceivable to Johnson. That a man should dare to stand aloof from his kind and condemn them was a higher pitch of arrogance, destined to end in that tempest of madness and hate which is the Fourth Book of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Lastly, it cannot be denied that Johnson did scant justice to Gray; although here, again, his praise of the *Elegy* could hardly be bettered. The causes of this imperfect sympathy are easy to understand. Gray was a recluse poet, shy, sensitive, dainty, who brooded on his own feelings and guarded his own genius from contact with the rough world. 'He had a notion,' says Johnson, 'not very peculiar, that he could not write but at certain times, or at happy moments; a fantastic foppery, to which my kindness for a man of learning and virtue wishes him to have been superior.' Surely this impatience will seem only natural to those who remember the story of Johnson's life. He had lived for thirty years, and had supported others, solely by the labours of his pen. The pay he received was often wretchedly small. Fifteen guineas was the price of the copyright of the *Life of Savage*. He was driven from task to task, compelled to supply the booksellers with what they

demanded, prefaces, translations, or sermons at a guinea a piece. In spite of sickness and lassitude and intense disinclination, the day's work had to be done, and when work did not come to hand, it had to be sought and solicited. It is not easy for us to imagine the conditions of literature in London when Johnson first came there, and for many years after,—the crowds of miserable authors, poor, servile, jealous, and venal. Immersed in this society he laboured for years. The laws that he imposed on his drudgery were never broken. He made no personal attacks on others, and answered none on himself. He never complied with temporary curiosity, nor enabled his readers to discuss the topic of the day. He never degraded virtue by the meanness of dedication. There was nothing in his writings to disclaim and nothing to regret, for he always thought it the duty of an anonymous author to write as if he expected to be hereafter known. When at last he was known, there was still no escape from hack-work and the necessities of the day. The books which he has added to the English Classics were written for bread—the *Dictionary*, the periodical papers, *Rasselas*, the Preface and Notes to Shakespeare (which will some day be recognized for what they are, the best and most luminous of eighteenth-century commentaries on Shakespeare's drama), and the *Lives of the Poets*.

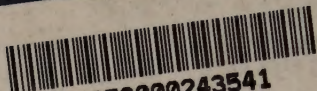
This is the greatness of Johnson, that he is greater than his works. He thought of himself as a man, not as an author; and of literature as a means, not as an end in itself. Duties and friendships and charities were more to him than fame and honour. The breadth and humanity of temper which sometimes caused him to depreciate the importance of literature, have left their mark on his books. There are some authors who

exhaust themselves in the effort to endow posterity, and distil all their virtue in a book. Yet their masterpieces have something inhuman about them, like those jewelled idols, the work of men's hands, which are worshipped by the sacrifice of man's flesh and blood. There is more of comfort and dignity in the view of literature to which Johnson has given large utterance: 'Books without the knowledge of life are useless; for what should books teach but the art of living?'



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